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RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0037/01 1781259
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FM RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0290
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0251
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 0219
RUEHDIR/RPO DUBAI 0282

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000037

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/26/2018
TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENTISTS ON CASPIAN SEA ISSUES

REF: RPO DUBAI 0021

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Acting Director, Iran Regional
Presence Office, DoS.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: On May 15 IRPOff met with an Iranian ecology professor and his wife, a marine biologist and expert on sturgeon fish at the International sturgeon research institute in the Iranian city of Rasht, located on the Caspian Sea. The couple claimed that Russia and Azerbaijan are producing pollution in the sea, making the waters unhealthy, particularly for sturgeon fish, the population of which is already threatened and declining. The marine biologist said Iran is guilty of over fishing of sturgeons for the lucrative caviar market and both scientists claimed their government does not place importance on wildlife conservation. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the five states bordering the Caspian Sea, Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan have not come to a consensus on the division of the sea and its natural resources (reftel). End Summary.

Pollution in the Caspian Sea - Russia and Azerbaijan blamed

2.(C) On May 15 IRPOff met with an Iranian ecology professor and his wife, a marine biologist and expert on sturgeon fish at the International sturgeon research institute in the Iranian city of Rasht, located on the Caspian Sea. The couple described the ecological health of the Caspian sea as poor and claimed that the neighboring countries are not doing their part to protect the health of the sea. They claimed that Russia is the worst polluter among the 5 states that share the Caspian sea mainly because the Volga River, which provides 80% of the Caspian water, carries high amounts of domestic and industrial waste from Russia into the sea. They ranked Azerbaijan second because of oil pollution, and lack of environmental laws; sturgeons, she said, are very susceptible to low oxygen and the current water quality is not protective of sturgeons. They ranked Iran third because of over fishing, and said the other two states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, so far have insignificant impact on the sea.

Caspian sturgeon faces extinction

3.(C) The marine biologist, who does research to conserve and restore the population of sturgeon, said that over fishing is killing this caviar fish. She said the Caspian Sea is the habitat for more than 90 % of the sturgeon in the world and up to 90% of the world's black caviar comes from the Caspian

region. Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iran all border the Caspian and catch various species of sturgeons for their flesh and caviar, however in recent years over-fishing has threatened the species to the point that environmentalists advocate a total ban on sturgeon fishing until the reserves replenish. She said the Sturgeon population is so low that they can hardly find fish for their research purposes. The marine biologist blamed over fishing. She said it's essential for the government to enforce proper monitoring to prevent the accidental catch of young sturgeons and spawners.

4.(C) According to the marine biologist, demand for caviar remains high with one kilogram of high quality caviar costing about 2100 dollars, and Iran has been playing a significant role in the lucrative market. She said there has been a tremendous amount of sturgeon fishing in Iran in recent years, both legally and illegally, and sometimes they even come across poachers when they are doing field research. She said they avoid them out of fear, and it is the government's role to control smuggling.

Government careless in protecting endangered animals

5.(C) According to the ecologist, the government places no importance on wildlife conservation. Regarding efforts to protect the endangered Asiatic or Iranian cheetah ("yuz palang" in Persian), the ecologist told IRPoff that the Iranian government does not care about people, let alone animals, because many people do not have health insurance and cannot buy medicine. For example, he said the government recently approved construction of a major highway that cuts directly through the main habitat of the endangered Asiatic cheetah. Just 2 weeks ago one cheetah was hit by a car and killed, the global value of which he said was 25 thousand dollars. He said environmentalists have very little influence on government behavior whereas wealthy developers exert a great deal of

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influence.ASGARD